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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUBAI 1141

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SUBJECT: POPULAR IRANIAN VIEWS OF TEHRAN'S POLICY
TOWARD ISRAEL (RESPONSE TO C-NA1-01033)

REF: A) DUBAI 1058 28 AUG 01 B) DUBAI 1197 08 NOV 00
C) DUBAI 1254 10 NOV 00

¶1. (U) CLASSIFIED BY PRINCIPAL OFFICER RICHARD OLSON FOR
REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

¶2. (C) SUMMARY. IRANIAN VISA APPLICANTS, DUBAI-BASED TRADERS, AND IRANIANS RESIDENT IN DUBAI PROVIDED THEIR ASSESSMENT OF IRAN'S POLICY TOWARD ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIAN CONFLICT. OF THOSE WHO EXPRESSED OPINIONS-- MANY IRANIANS WHOM CONOFF APPROACHED CLAIMED THAT THEY EITHER DID NOT HAVE AN OPINION OR DID NOT INVOLVE THEMSELVES IN POLITICS--IT IS CLEAR THAT THERE IS A DISCONNECT TO SOME DEGREE BETWEEN THE IRANIAN GOVERNMENT'S STRIDENT PUBLIC SUPPORT OF THE PALESTINIANS AND CORRESPONDING VITRIOL TOWARDS ISRAEL AND THE PRIVATE VIEWS HELD BY THE MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION. WHILE IT APPEARS THAT MANY IRANIANS SYMPATHIZE WITH THE HUMANITARIAN PLIGHT OF THE PALESTINIANS, GIVEN IRAN'S DOMESTIC ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES THEY QUESTION WHY IRAN IS OUT IN FRONT OF EVEN THE ARABS, DEVOTING SCARCE FINANCIAL RESOURCES TO FIGHTING 'THE ARABS' FIGHT'. SOME INTERVIEWEES REPORT THAT TEHRAN IS EXPLOITING THE ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT FOR DOMESTIC POLITICAL REASONS, WHILE OTHERS EVEN PROFESSED PRO-ISRAEL SENTIMENT. ALL, HOWEVER, CAUTIONED ABOUT THE DANGER OF EXPRESSING THESE TYPES OF VIEWS OPENLY, EVEN TO OTHER IRANIANS. OF THE FEW IRANIANS INTERVIEWED WHO APPEARED TO BE MORE SUPPORTIVE OF TEHRAN'S POLICIES, COUNTERBALANCING US INFLUENCE IN THE REGION WAS SEEN TO BE A MOTIVATOR FOR THE REGIME'S ACTIVITIES. END SUMMARY.

A DIFFICULT ISSUE TO DISCUSS

¶3. (C) IN LATE AUGUST/EARLY SEPTEMBER DISCUSSIONS WITH CONOFF MANY IRANIANS SHIED AWAY FROM OFFERING THEIR OPINIONS OF IRAN'S POLICY VIS A VIS THE ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT. CLAIMING EITHER TO BE APOLITICAL OR AFRAID TO DISCUSS THE ISSUE, EVEN RELATIVELY BENIGN QUESTIONS SUCH AS "WHAT IS IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE CONFLICT" WENT UNANSWERED. APPARENTLY SPEAKING TO AN AMERICAN OFFICIAL WAS NOT THE CRUX OF THE PROBLEM; AS ONE 45-YEAR OLD BUSINESSMAN EXPLAINED "IT IS TOO DANGEROUS TO TALK ABOUT THE SUBJECT EVEN AMONG IRANIANS." (REF DUBAI 1058 DATED 28 AUGUST 01 FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT INCREASING IRANIAN HESITANCE TO ENGAGE IN DISCUSSION ABOUT A NUMBER OF POLITICAL ISSUES.) IN THWARTING DISCUSSION OF THE ISSUE MANY PROFESSED TO CONCERN THEMSELVES ONLY WITH THEIR WORK AND HAD NO INTEREST IN POLITICS. OTHERS WHOM CONOFF APPROACHED ATTESTED THAT IRANIANS ARE VERY PREOCCUPIED WITH THE ECONOMY AND MAKING ENDS MEET AND THEREFORE ARE NOT FOCUSED ON WHAT IS HAPPENING OUTSIDE OF THE COUNTRY.

CONCERN FOR BOTH PALESTINIANS AND THE COST OF THAT SUPPORT

¶4. (C) OF THE IRANIANS WHO ENGAGED IN DISCUSSION ABOUT THE ISSUE, IT APPEARS THAT THAT A LARGE SEGMENT OF THE POPULATION WOULD CLASSIFY THEMSELVES AS PRO-PALESTINIAN AND THEY ARE CONCERNED--ON A HUMANITARIAN LEVEL--ABOUT THE

PALESTINIANS' PLIGHT. ONE IRANIAN DUBAI-BASED BUSINESSMAN ESTIMATED THAT 80% TO 90% OF IRANIANS ARE SYMPATHETIC TOWARDS THE PALESTINIANS' CONDITION, AND AN IRANIAN STUDENT SPOKE FAVORABLY ABOUT THE UP-TICK IN VISIBLE IRANIAN HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT FOR THE PALESTINIANS THIS PAST YEAR. ACCORDING TO HIM THE GOVERNMENT HAS ISSUED PUBLIC APPEALS FOR IRANIANS TO DONATE MONEY TO PALESTINIANS AND HAS BROUGHT INJURED PALESTINIANS TO IRAN FOR TREATMENT.

¶15. (C) DESPITE THESE SYMPATHIES, HOWEVER, THE IRANIAN DUBAI-BASED BUSINESSMAN REPORTED THAT IT APPEARS TO MANY IRANIANS THAT IRAN IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF FIGHTING WHAT IS AN ESSENTIALLY AN ARAB FIGHT. IT IS BELIEVED THAT IRAN IS THE MOST SUPPORTIVE AMONG THE REGION'S COUNTRIES OF GIVING FINANCIAL AND POLITICAL SUPPORT TO THE PALESTINIANS AND THEY WONDER WHY ARABS ARE NOT SHOWING A SIMILAR LEVEL OF COMRADERIE. MOREOVER, IRANIANS ARE CONCERNED THAT THEIR COUNTRY CANNOT AND SHOULD NOT AFFORD TO GIVE SUCH FINANCIAL

SUPPORT AND THAT GIVEN THE DIFFICULT ECONOMIC CONDITIONS FACED AT HOME BY THE MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION "EVERY PENNY COUNTS."

¶16. (C) THE MAJORITY OF IRANIANS INTERVIEWED BELIEVE THAT IRAN'S SUPPORT OF THE PALESTINIANS IS LIMITED TO POLITICAL AND HUMANITARIAN FINANCIAL SUPPORT. INTERVIEWEES COULD NOT QUANTIFY THE LEVEL OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT, HOWEVER ONE BUSINESSMAN SURMISED THAT THE CURRENT LEVEL "IS LESS THAN IN THE PAST." THE IRANIAN DUBAI-BASED BUSINESSMAN DID NOT BELIEVE THAT IRAN GAVE THE PALESTINIANS MILITARY SUPPORT. HE ASKED RHETORICALLY "WHAT COULD THEY [IRAN] REALLY GIVE THAT COULD COUNTERACT ISRAEL? THE ISRAELI MILITARY COULD FLATTEN PALESTINE, SYRIA AND LEBANON WITHIN TWO TO THREE DAYS."

PUBLIC DOES NOT SHARE REGIME'S VITRIOL IN PRIVATE

¶17. (C) BESIDES THE ECONOMIC COST OF SUPPORTING THE PALESTINIANS, SEVERAL IRANIANS REPORTED THAT PEOPLE DO NOT SHARE THE LEVEL OF VITRIOL THE REGIME ESPOUSES VIS A VIS ISRAEL. THE IRANIAN DUBAI-BASED BUSINESSMAN REPORTED THAT PEOPLE ARE TIRED OF THE HARSH RHETORIC BUT THAT THEY BELIEVE THAT "AS LONG AS THE MULLAHS ARE IN GOVERNMENT" IRAN WILL WANT TO "ANNIHILATE" ISRAEL AND WILL HOLD THAT GOAL AS A TENET OF THE REGIME. INTERVIEWEES DID NOT SEEM TO SEE DIVISIONS WITHIN THE IRANIAN GOVERNMENT ON THIS ISSUE. AS A 70-YR OLD RETIREE CAUTIONED, "YOU MUST NOT LUMP IRANIAN PEOPLE IN WITH THE REGIME." (SIMILAR POPULAR IDEOLOGICAL FATIGUE HAS BEEN REPORTED IN THE PAST. REF DUBAI 1197 DATED 08 NOV 00.)

¶18. (C) THE BELIEF ALSO EXISTS THAT IRAN'S SUPPORT OF THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE HAS A DISINGENUOUS ANGLE TO IT. ACCORDING TO A UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR THE IRANIAN REGIME HYPES THE ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT TO SUIT ITS OWN PURPOSES DOMESTICALLY. THE REGIME TRIED TO BLAME THE SERIAL MURDERS OF INTELLECTUALS ON "ISRAELI INTERVENTION" AND IS CURRENTLY HIGHLIGHTING THE SUFFERING OF THE PALESTINIANS TO TRY TO MAKE THE IRANIAN POPULACE FEEL FRIVOLOUS AND GREEDY FOR WANTING REFORMS AND "HAVING FUN" WHILE THEIR PALESTINIAN "BRETHREN" ARE IN THEIR DARKEST HOUR.

¶19. (C) EXPRESSING VIEWPOINTS ABOUT THE ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN ISSUE THAT DEPART FROM THE OFFICIAL LINE IS SEEN TO BE A DANGEROUS UNDERTAKING. THE PROFESSOR EXPLAINED THAT PEOPLE ARE AFRAID TO SPEAK OUT AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT, AND DO NOT PUBLICLY VOICE THEIR OPPOSITION TO GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF THE PALESTINIANS. HE ADDED THAT THE CURRENT PUBLIC RETICENCE TO EXPRESS OPINIONS ABOUT A RANGE OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IS WIDESPREAD, AND THAT SINCE THE BERLIN CONFERENCE MANY INTELLECTUALS--LIKE PHILOSOPHER ABDOLKARIM SORUSH--HAVE STOPPED SPEAKING OUT AND ARE CHOOSING TO LIVE LOWER PROFILE LIVES.

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SOME SEGMENTS EVEN SYMPATHETIC TOWARDS ISRAEL

¶10. (C) SEVERAL INTERVIEWEES REPORTED THAT A LATENT PRO-ISRAEL BIAS EXISTS. A DUBAI TRADER WHO RECENTLY RETURNED FROM IRAN TOLD CONOFF THAT SEVERAL IRANIANS THAT HE SPOKE WITH EXPRESS PRO-ISRAEL SENTIMENTS BENEATH THE SURFACE. HE ATTRIBUTED THIS TO THE FACT THAT ALTHOUGH IRANIANS WERE CONVERTED TO ISLAM, MANY STILL PERCEIVE A BOND OF KINSHIP BETWEEN THEIR ORIGINAL RELIGION OF ZOROASTRIANISM AND JUDAISM. A SECOND BUSINESSMAN REPORTED THAT SENTIMENT EXISTS WITHIN THE IRANIAN BUSINESS COMMUNITY THAT IF THE REGIME WOULD ONLY TONE DOWN ITS RHETORIC IRAN COULD HAVE GOOD BUSINESS RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL.

¶11. (C) PAST INTERVIEWS WITH IRANIANS HAVE ALSO HIGHLIGHTED SOME PRO-ISRAEL SENTIMENT. A MEMBER OF THE IRANIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY LAST NOVEMBER REPORTED THAT IRAN'S JEWISH POPULATION FEELS A STRONG--BUT WELL-HIDDEN--AFFINITY FOR THE STATE OF ISRAEL. (REF DUBAI 1254 DATED 10 NOV 00)

MINORITY OPINION: IRAN INVOLVED TO COUNTER US

¶12. (C) OF THE SMALL NUMBER OF IRANIANS INTERVIEWED WHO BELIEVED THAT IRANIAN INVOLVEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE PALESTINIANS WAS WARRANTED, COUNTERING PERCEIVED PRO-ISRAEL US INFLUENCE WAS CITED AS THE PRINCIPAL MOTIVATOR. ACCORDING TO THE OWNER OF AN IRANIAN TRANSPORTATION COMPANY THE US HAS STOKED THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS AS A WAY TO PUSH IRAN TO INTERVENE IN THE REGION. HEAVY US SUPPORT OF ISRAEL HAS INSURED THAT IRAN WOULD SUPPORT THE PALESTINIANS, AND PROVIDED A CONVENIENT PRETEXT FOR US CONTINUANCE OF ILSA. HE LABELED ILSA PROPONENTS AS PRO-ISRAEL AND STATED THAT THOSE PROPONENTS HAD WANTED GORE INSTEAD TO WIN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION.

¶13. (C) A DUBAI-BASED IRANIAN ENTREPRENEUR PROVIDED HIS OPINION OF WESTERN ASSERTIONS THAT THE IRANIAN GOVERNMENT IS A STATE SPONSOR OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM. HE IS PRAGMATIC, BELIEVING THAT NEARLY EVERY GOVERNMENT SPONSORS TERRORISM, AND MAINTAINED THAT THE IRANIAN GOVERNMENT IS NOT DOING "ANYTHING DIFFERENT THAN ISRAEL, THE US OR UK." ACCORDING TO HIM THE US SELECTIVELY SINGLES OUT IRAN AND HE USED THE UAE-IRAN DISPUTE OVER ABU MUSA AND THE TUNBS ISLANDS AS AN EXAMPLE, SAYING THAT THE ONLY TIME THE GCC MAKES BELLIGERENT STATEMENTS AGAINST IRAN IS WHEN THE US IS PRESSURING THEM TO PUNISH TEHRAN. HE CONTINUED THAT THE ORGANS IN IRAN THAT CARRY OUT INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM--SUCH AS THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES--ARE NECESSARY IN ORDER FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO RETAIN POWER.

OLSON